

Deeper Than Skin by Pondermoniums

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Summary:

Steve knew wealth. He knew money, and all of the material variations therein.

But Billy Hargrove is stubborn to a fault. Gorgeous as Lucifer with wings freshly burnt off. And just as dangerous.

“I thought I said no more gifts.”

“And I ignored you. Open it.”

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- For [LazyBaker](#).

I started writing this after I read [this post](#) by the wonderful @lazybakerart on tumblr AND THEN I FIND OUT that it's their BIRTHDAY 🥳🥳🥳🥳🥳. I really couldn't help myself, the timing was too good.

[Read on tumblr here ~](#)

Steve just stared at the box on the restaurant table. It wasn't a ring box, but it was velvet. Goodness knew how many of these he'd seen in his life.

Steve knew wealth. He knew money, and all of the material variations therein.

He'd gotten pedicures with his mother before his father declared such a thing unfit for a boy coming into puberty. If you look like a man, act like a man. As if men didn't have feet, or something.

Then he went to the salon. That wasn't so easy to take away. Ventures with her son seemed to be the only things keeping Mrs. Harrington from being connected to her husband's hip, so Mr. Harrington let them both have this one. Steve, fresh out of graduation, being given a hairdresser's chair to accomplish summer-fresh highlights.

Mrs. Harrington was also the type of woman to enjoy shoes. Everyone has a *thing*. For some, they had bags. Others, jewelry. Vintage furniture. Designer wallpaper. Mrs. Harrington enjoyed shoes. It was where Steve learned to carry a woman's bags, but he didn't stay outside of the store. He learned how to clean suede, the difference between a 130 So Kate and an ordinary heel. What *fetish* meant in terms of fashion. He can convert heels sizes in millimeters to inches faster than a cashier calculating change.

Tommy and Carol had joked about Steve's father having a different kind of fetish. Nothing to do with fashion, and everything to do with sex. Steve had foolishly let them into his mother's bedroom and they were having a field day with a shoe closet that cost more than both of their houses combined. Still smelling of *Nancy* and pool chlorine, Steve as good as ended that friendship right there.

Because they didn't get it.

Mr. Harrington certainly didn't get it. Could never have such a sexual inclination because he didn't understand pampering or indulgent interests.

He understood favors. Material apologies.

Mrs. Harrington had a collection of pearls and diamonds that she never wore.

Steve knew she liked opals and pink, pink rubies, because Steve liked opals too. Because he used his father's money to buy ruby studs his mother actually wore. Because he gets her oldest, broken bracelet with green amber fixed, and she wears it until it breaks again. And then she presented Steve with a thin, gold chain to go around his ankle. With a gleaming, green amber stone flanked by two opals.

The green goes with our eyes, she said. Someone special will see the green in all that brown. It's why we look good in reds.

Steve was still looking at the box on the table.

"It's not going to catch fire, the longer you glare at it."

His dark hazel, creek water eyes slanted up to the man sitting opposite him.

Billy Hargrove.

Stubborn to a fault. Gorgeous as Lucifer with wings freshly burnt off. And just as dangerous.

"I thought I said no more gifts."

“And I ignored you. Open it.”

Steve went about it like ripping off a bandaid. He sighed at the window beside their booth, wrenching the thing open to see -

Diamonds.

He shut it with a loud clap and set it on Billy's placemat. “No, thanks.”

The man's features froze in tolerant stoicism, but he eased the box inside his suit jacket pocket. “You're a hard one to shop for.”

Steve's eyes widened dramatically over his wine glass of water. Not because he was sober - he'd willingly pay for an overpriced red, himself, if the handsome asshole weren't trying to wave his wallet everywhere. “You can stop trying to buy your way into my pants any time you want.”

“If that's all I wanted, I would've stopped three months ago.”

Three months ago,

When Billy breezed into Steve's life as easily as he had senior year of high school. The two of them certainly deserved some kind of award for having a bizarre history.

Within a handful of months, Billy had arrived upon a turbulent time in Steve's life, and then left nearly as quickly. Billy witnessed Steve and Nancy's break-up, Steve's fall from Hawkins High grace, and even beat his face a little bit. Because that's what teenage men with bad emotional processing and even worse communication skills do.

Now, almost ten years later, Billy had some kind of empire behind him and Steve, well, didn't. He had no idea what Billy's job consisted of, but he got little hints. Mostly the negative space from Billy's *lack of* discussing his job told Steve a whole lot.

Steve, who worked two jobs and occasional gigs wherever he was needed. During one such time, while Steve managed the cables and sound boards for Robin's band, Billy Hargrove sauntered up to him with just as much charm mixed with hauteur as he'd ever displayed.

It wasn't like meeting an old friend, because they had never been more than acquaintances, and roughly ten years was enough time for a personality to evolve ten different ways.

Steve couldn't say how much he and Billy had evolved, really, but there was a point in there somewhere.

Maybe it lived in the, "I never expected to see you in a dyke club, pretty boy," since it was all the coming out either of them needed.

Or the wanton kisses and fervent hands underneath the neon rainbow on the venue's wall.

Maybe the point sat in the things Billy wanted, and what Steve was reticent to provide. Because Billy was a king who knew what he liked, and seemed particularly talented at walking into Steve's personal crises like an anniversary.

Steve *craved*.

But he didn't know *what* he craved. What he yearned for. He knew Billy's kisses made his brain go molten and fuzzy. He knew Billy's smell brought him just as much comfort, excitement, and anxiety. He knew finally being outside of sex-crazed high school had deflated something in him. The expectations to perform. He knew losing Robin's stupid game of *You Rule / You Suck* gave him a secret gift of relief.

But he still craved. He wanted touch but he wanted to be alone. He wanted companionship but he didn't want sex. But he *did* enjoy sex, except he didn't want the expectation of it.

Well.

That was it, wasn't it?

Billy Hargrove, who could have anyone he wanted plastered to his stupid, unbuttoned chest, had sought out Steve. Steve, king of mixed signals, Harrington. It was only a matter of time before he got his face beaten again. For wasting Billy's time. For refusing Billy's advances even though Steve clearly enjoyed Billy's lips on his neck, and Billy's hand on his inner thigh. For wanting Billy's company and

flirtation without the rules that finished in the bedroom.

So Steve refused the gifts. The material favors he could've sold for a better apartment. Fucked his way to owning a house that his mom would feel comfortable visiting. Be an unfeeling toy who could pay for his mother's shoes and his own pedicures.

"Steve?"

He turned away from the window and the city's electric constellations. "Hm?"

"Where'd you go?"

The back of Steve's throat ached. He looked down at their appetizer plates and decided, "I think I'm going home." After a second of them both hearing it out loud, Steve said with more conviction, "I need to be home right now. I'm sorry. Thanks for dinner."

He almost reached for his wallet to pay for his half of the artichoke dip, but reconsidered. He took his old prom tuxedo jacket off on the way to the elevator, waiting for the doors to close before he pressed his face into the old fibers.

It would be easier if Steve didn't know money. If wealth were a foreign pillow he had never slept on; could be spoiled into never giving it up again.

Like a true mother with a sixth sense, Steve withdrew a package from his mailbox when he returned to his apartment building. Mrs. Harrington's versions of care packages were fashion magazines, a subscription to *The New Yorker*, polaroids of her latest closet pieces, and Steve's favorite candy.

He loved it all. He didn't need laminated recipes, bags of rice, or resupplied hair products. He went up to his bedroom, stripped down to nothing, and fell into bed with the hefty parcel. Fruity hard candies fell out like confetti, and he stuck a green apple square inside his cheek while he looked through her baggie of polaroids.

Peach suede 130s. Steve felt a warm tickle in his belly at that. She only wore 130s if she was pissed at his father. A woman in 130s

walked with the force of a storm, mostly because the damn things were nearly intolerable to wear without a platform.

Another pair of diamond earrings. One of these days, people were going to realize how boring clear rocks were.

Dark, amethyst *Miu Miu*s with the heel and toe encrusted with pearls. Steve's dad must've really pissed her off to warrant that apology.

The magazine subscription had piled up, so he had three *New Yorkers* to read, but he opened the tome of *Vogue* first. His mother dog-eared her favorite articles, scent samples, and spreads. She often favored the androgynous and male fragrances. Steve liked that a whole lot. He wasn't sure if she did that for him because he liked them, or if he liked them because she did that.

He held the magazine to his face as he went to the kitchen, smelling the first fragrance sample while he reached for his cache of boxed cake mix. It was a funfetti kind of night. He rattled the package of sprinkles in his hand while reading about some summer collection where the runway happened in a Greek amphitheatre. Sounded fun. Sounded like a great vacation. Beach, wine, and then modern art fusing with ancient architecture.

Steve didn't excel in chemistry, but he knew a different kind of magic.

Which didn't actually include baking. The cake emerged a little dark, but he cut off the burnt top, iced it to glorious, sugar perfection, and took a slice to bed with him. He turned the parcel upside-down for the last of the candy to come out so he could throw the envelope away -

Two bottles of nail polish landed heavily on the bed. Steve lifted the darker bottle to see a purple so ebony he thought it was black until he opened it to see the paint up close.

Purple and peach. To match his mother's shoes.

Not many people understood his parents' methods of producing or avoiding affection. But Steve did. He shook up the poison violet and

painted his toenails in between forkfuls of cake.

He didn't hear from Billy the next day.

Or the next.

As bad as Steve felt, he couldn't say he minded. Nor would he be surprised if Billy never called him again. The idea brought a lonely peace during the commute to work, reading his magazines on the train before keeping them safe in a folder that he stuffed inside his backpack. Even if Steve's chest felt like a cold balloon, with its latex worn thin and tired, he had his little things to keep him warm.

Then a knock on his apartment door.

Steve answered it with a cheek full of cake, interrupted from making his grocery list of actual nutritional value -

Billy had never visited before. Steve stared at him long enough for him to ask, "Are you going to let me in?"

Steve glanced at the box under his arm and turned into his apartment with a sigh. Billy closed the door behind him as he remarked, "You don't know what's in it yet."

There wasn't exactly anywhere for Steve to theatrically storm off to. His kitchen was also his living room, and a half-wall partitioned the bedroom off to the side. His apartment was one long rectangle, and Steve remained stuck in the middle of it.

"Billy, I don't know what you want from me that you think you can get by giving me expensive things."

"I don't recall asking for anything in return," he drawled while removing his coat.

"Don't take that off," Steve retorted.

"I'm taking it off."

"This isn't going to be a long visit."

“Would you at least open the damn thing first?” Billy presented the box on the flat of his hand like a waiter’s tray.

Steve knew a shoe box when he saw one. He swatted the lid off the box before he even meant to. He was so tired of this game. Of these rules. He doesn’t want to see some snotty designer sneaker that isn’t to his taste. Some item the *rules* would dictate he accept without complaint. Or some chunky, foamy plastic, glorified tennis shoe that is over hyped . . .

He sees the red first.

It’s not a sneaker.

Hot Chick heels. 100mm. Black suede on top, red bottom. The leather around the heel scallop-cut like minimalist flower petals.

Steve’s breath has stopped in his chest. The pad of his thumb moved across the soft, matte leather before he stops himself. He tries to look stern when he dares to peek up at Billy, but those water-turquoise eyes are steady on him, absorbing his every reaction.

“These don’t exist in suede.”

Because they didn’t. Hot Chicks came in patent leather only.

“They do now.”

“Louboutin sizes down.”

“Then we’ll have them stretched.”

Steve is losing. Billy knows he’s losing. Billy - he -

“How - ?” Steve begins but stops. He closed his eyes and swallowed, only to flinch a little when Billy grasped his chin, holding him in place as he leaned in to lick the corner of his mouth free of icing.

“Will you try them on for me?”

Steve feels a mixture of defeat mixed in with petulance and vulnerable glee as he warily takes the box to his humble couch. Billy

looked at his bed, and then to the kitchen on the other side of the apartment. He strolled into it and lifted the knife for a slice.

Steve, meanwhile, took his time. He opened the paper from where it had floated back over the shoes. He lifted the box to inhale the leather. He took one shoe out just to...see it. Look at it. Read the number stamped on the red arch.

Steve had to remove his socks, revealing his lacquered toes as Billy sat next to him with a plate. He eased the coffee table out of the way, giving Steve room to wiggle his foot into the severe 100mm heel.

They were hardly glamorous under his old, cut-off sweats.

But.

He'd never actually seen his feet in heels before. Never bothered to try to find his size.

Billy handed him the other shoe, and stood up with a ready hand. Steve wiggled into it and accepted his hold as he stood up.

How do you walk in those? he'd once asked his mother.

Trust the heel, my love, she'd answered, strolling around her bedroom in her 130s. *If you've paid enough for it, it better hold up your entire form, and your dating baggage.*

Steve had laughed, but listened to her every word. *Move like a wheel barrow. You pivot on your toes, like the wheel, and rest on the heels.*

"I've got you," Billy purred when Steve teetered. Just a little.

"Why did you get me these?" Steve had to ask while he began to ease his arm off of Billy's shoulders.

"Might've had a look inside your mail," he admitted shamelessly. "I thought you might've ordered something and I could finally see what you liked. Instead, it's the one thing I've seen you accept."

"You're a creep," Steve declared, but he couldn't look away from his feet as he strolled around the coffee table.

Billy laughed and sat down to his cake. "This is good."

"It's from a box."

"It's still good."

Things . . . changed, after that. Billy came over just to come over. And he pestered Steve with endless questions.

"Do you like these?" he asked with his nose against the magazine pages.

Steve towered over him in his heels, but he'd wash dishes in whatever he wanted, thanks very much. And leather needed to be worn, as his mother taught him. *Plastic is trash. If it comes from a living creature, it lives on a creature.*

Steve snorted beside him. "My mom crimps those pages."

"But do you like them?"

"They're fun in magazines, but perfumes were never really my thing."

"What is your thing?"

"Right now? You, elbows deep in here."

Billy perked right out of the magazine only to lock onto the sink. "Because you're having trouble reaching it now?"

Steve meant to have a witty come-back, but he got caught up in his own giggles. "Yeah."

Then,

"Can I stay the night?"

Something must have flashed across his face, because Billy added, "Not for sex. I've taken the hint, all right?"

Steve slowly unfolded his socks where he sat on the foot of the bed. "Why do you want to?"

Billy wiped his hands on the dish towel and padded across the room to sit beside him. "Because I want to taste you before I sleep. And I wanna taste you when I wake up. I want your snark in my ears all the time - "

"All the time?" Steve repeated, deadpan.

"Yeah, all the time. I can't believe it either."

Billy's features were warm, unbelievably warm as he watched Steve laugh. "Of course I want to have sex with you. But I miss you when... I miss you all the time. It's embarrassing."

Steve rolled his eyes onto him, to which Billy defended, "I have *things* to do."

"Yeah, 'cause you're the big man in town," Steve babied, pushing his chest so he toppled backward.

"I am, actually," he crooned, his hands finding Steve's legs easily when he straddled him. "I'd work better with you on my desk."

"My hairy legs and scraped up heels?" Steve threatened breathily, holding Billy's cheek and jaw in one hand while he leaned over him so all Billy could see was *Steve*.

"*All of it*," he exhaled, and pulled Steve's head the last inch for a kiss.

Billy's next gift was a pair of slippers. Plush, soft, and perfect after an afternoon in 100s.

Then he gave Steve a massage. Steve could accept those with ease. The balls of his feet hurt and even blushed a faint indigo from being so unused to heels. The warm attention of Billy's hands on the arches of his feet, heels, and ankles; as well as the cold tennis balls he stored in Steve's freezer to roll along his feet.

By then, he'd seen Steve's anklet. So the next shoe box Steve opened were dark green suede, as poisonously dark as his mother's violet heels. The toe was bare, but the heel was encrusted with opals. The milky stones flashed green and orange as Steve walked in the 120mm heel.

“How do they feel?”

Steve, with far more mastery over heels now, pivoted on his toes and planted one on the couch in between Billy’s thighs. His warm hand cradled Steve’s ankle immediately.

“What if I shaved for these?”

“Then I’d never take my hands off you.”

“So nothing would change,” Steve giggled, teasing gone as he landed on Billy’s lap. The man underneath him hummed his mirth into Steve’s mouth, his other hand burying in Steve’s hair while he let Steve control the kiss, explore his mouth.

“I thought they’d go with your eyes,” he said when the kiss petered off and Steve kissed his nose. Billy touched the pad of his thumb high on Steve’s cheek. “There’s a little bit of green there.”

Steve let Billy fuck him in those shoes.

Because he finally craved all the way, beyond fear of rules. Beyond the existence of toys. He craved Billy deeper than skin, and Billy gave it to him.

And when Billy got him a pair of 130s . . . blood red and spiked with tiny, crimson points, he let Steve fuck him.

Notes for the Chapter:

This was originally a one shot, so this first chapter is meant to be read on its own. But you're more than welcome to help yourself to the rest <3

Edit hot chicks do come in several different styles. I haven't seen them in suede (yet) but...I don't think that's important lol

This fic has a moodboard! The gorgeous @catharrington on tumblr made it for me <3

My harringrove Tumblr~

My main Tumblr~

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

[Read on tumblr ~](#)

Billy's thumb pressed along Steve's arch, holding the pressure for a few seconds as he went along . . .

He peeked up at the sound of ocean-swaying breaths at the head of the bed. As if he could hear the exact moment Steve fell into REM sleep, clutching Billy's latest gift to his chest.

An elephant ear leaf plushie. It was half the size of Steve, and it's heart-shape tucked under his chin to pillow his cheek perfectly. The soft micro-fleece behaved like crushed velvet, the light absorbing inside the dark, unsettled fibers where Steve touched it.

Billy had gotten very good at choosing gifts for him.

Steve's apartment was slowly filling up with Billy's tokens of affection. The window seat had become a shelf for Steve's shoe boxes; only three so far, but Billy intended to get him a proper shoe rack, or renovate his closet

Or have Steve move into his place. Billy wanted nothing more in the world. To get home to Steve slumped on the couch, immediately complaining of incongruent television plots as if Billy had never left the room. To see Steve's shirts and clutter in their closet despite Steve being gone for work. To put his shoe collection on display in any room Steve wanted, so he could live in the open with his interests, instead of walking laps in their closet.

Not all of his gifts were expensive. That proved the trick. The key to Steve's locked tight heart. Most were certainly pricey, but once Billy knew what he liked, what he constituted as *worth it*, then he couldn't help himself.

A coffee table book of *The New Yorker's* covers, spreads, and topmost articles throughout the 20th century. Steve stared at that thing for

hours.

The elephant ear pillow clutched to Steve's chest now, among other plant cushions. Steve claimed he couldn't keep anything alive, so Billy gave him a pink and blue sedum succulent, a purple and green echeveria, and a monstera leaf. He now lay in his garden, sound asleep despite Billy's rolling a cold tennis ball around his heel.

It was dangerous, this bruised ache in his chest.

Even with Steve right here, Billy felt sore with affection. The desire to wrap an arm around Steve's waist was ever present, to pull their bodies flush together, or to tuck himself into Steve's chest and never leave.

This ravenous greed dulled with Steve nearby, soothed with Steve happy and content, but Billy knew he had to be patient. Steve sometimes retreated inside himself, behaving as if Billy were already one step out the door. He had no idea what power he wielded over Billy.

He eased Steve's slippers onto his feet and returned the tennis ball to the freezer. He put some of the dishes and pans from the drying rack back in the cabinets. He straightened the rug underneath the coffee table. Tidying. As self-sufficient as Steve lived, Billy had picked up quickly enough that his outward affections were done through actions.

He liked making dinner with Billy at home. He even coerced Billy into the first grocery store he'd stepped into in years.

Steve enjoyed pulling Billy onto his chest to watch a movie. Billy liked that too, even though he wished Steve didn't stuff his utility invoices into the kitchen utensil drawer before Billy arrived.

They were both strong personalities who valued control, but Billy had learned such a thing came in different mediums. Steve didn't like the leash of money. "Don't collar me in diamonds. I'm not a poodle," he'd once said.

Billy did not take kindly to commands. To exist like a bull guided by

the ring in his nose.

Yet here they both were, Steve slowly allowing Billy to furnish his interests, and kissing Billy's cheek when he reluctantly accepted the task of chopping onions.

Billy sat on the bed and rubbed his arm. If anything, Steve only fell deeper inside his slumber. Slowly, Billy lifted him out by planting kisses along his hairline. All at once, Steve emerged with a shake of his head, as if to swat Billy off before the chuckle in his chest made Steve moan, "Bhh...lly?"

He slanted his arm across Steve's body, pressing his hand into the bed. "Hi, baby. I'm heading out. I should be back next Friday."

Steve's full, parted lips twitched with a puzzled grimace. "Huh?"

"I'm going out of town."

One of Steve's eyelids hung lower over his groggy eyes. Billy thought it looked cute. "You wait till I'm half-asleep to tell me?"

Billy huffed a laugh, but it faded quickly. "I told you during dinner. I asked you to come, but *you said* you couldn't get the vacation days."

Steve's eyes sagged closed in a long blink. He sniffed loudly and rubbed a palm over his nose while he shifted for better attentiveness. "I can't get vacation days with only a twenty-four hour notice."

"There was something about sick days from two jobs not aligning for an extended vacation," Billy recalled stiffly.

Steve did not respond well to the bitterness. "I'm not my own boss. If I'd had more time, I could've done a long weekend—"

"I'll be gone for two weeks."

That left Steve's mouth open while he shifted to sit up more on the pillows. "You didn't say that during dinner."

It should've been some consolation, Steve's being upset at such a time frame. Two weeks apart was hardly unbearable. For regular people.

For Billy, it only confirmed his distaste for Steve's unrelenting schedule.

"Now you want to go?"

Steve's eyes hardened as much as they could for being freshly disturbed from sleep. "It was never about not wanting to go. I literally can't without being thrown off the payroll."

"You work two jobs."

Steve's eyes wandered, as if searching for his meaning. "Yeah?"

Billy didn't want to talk about this the night before he left but his frustration won out. "You don't have to work two jobs. You know that, don't you?"

He could see something wilt behind Steve's face. "What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm saying."

"No. I don't."

"Steve," he sighed, lifting off his hand to sit on his own. "You know I don't mind paying for things."

"You've made that clear," Steve returned stiffly.

Billy pointed turquoise eyes at him. "Money is meant to be spent. Why won't you let me spend it on you?"

Those eyes locked on the muscles in Steve's jaw clenching. Steve could feel those irises on him, dissecting him. He wondered if Billy saw his mother's closet. More like a bank vault. Full of insurances for the day she finally saw fit to drop her husband and all of his betrayals, all of his business blunders that she was tired of dishing a sapphire out for to cover the losses.

An ironic thing, Mr. Harrington's greatest business scheme: apologizing with luxurious things. Marrying a woman smarter than himself. Maybe that's why Steve had sought out Nancy all those years

ago. Why he loved Robin's company and conversation. He did feel safe in strong women's company. But their safety was hard earned and shrewdly won.

Respect how a woman spends her money, Stevie. Even if you don't know where it comes from.

Sweetheart, you'll never understand what it is to be a woman in a man's world.

I love your daddy as much as he infuriates me beyond belief. But where I come from, nobody is handsome enough. Nobody is wealthy enough. A Rolex is a man's prideful status symbol. A woman's bags are her divorce lawyer's payments. A man's car is the steed to a shining knight. A woman's diamond necklace is her first apartment out of an unsafe home.

Am I really just a trust fund kid? Steve had been brazen enough to ask. Another diamond in his mother's closet.

She had stroked his cheek, raked her fingers through his hair and around his ear before pinching his earlobe in that way she did. Like she wanted him to keep looking right at her. Don't turn your head.

Anyone who treats you like a trust fund for money or a good time is plastic, baby.

She hadn't taught him how to navigate this, though. Maybe if he'd been a daughter, he'd have gotten that lesson. How to not be ensnared by money. How to keep wealth as a key to a cage.

But Steve only knew the cage. Had grown up in it. Had to face heartbreak and loneliness to break out of his gilded bars.

He did not judge his mother for relying on his father. As she'd said, she came from a different world with a different mentality. But Steve couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't meet all of his father's caveats. Had too much fun being broke with Robin to desire gilded masks and grey grey grey suits.

A warm hand touched his arm. "I don't like it when you do that," Billy said. "Go somewhere I can't reach."

Steve's hand overlapped his. He hoped it came across as encouraging instead of farewell. "Get your work done. There's no point in me taking a vacation if you're working the whole time."

It didn't work. Billy's features stiffened, far from pleased.

And when he left the apartment, Steve felt his path like a negative space dug out of his home. Billy Hargrove had always dominated a room, but Steve was afraid of being wrung out before he left with permanence. Steve didn't think Billy was a cage at all.

But he didn't think he was strong enough to be a diamond in Billy's closet.

Notes for the Chapter:

See you in part 3 🐼

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay this may be getting out of hand lol don't be surprised if this turns into 5 parts orz

[Read on tumblr here ~](#)

A week passed.

Billy didn't leave a number for Steve to call, and when he tried to phone Billy's secretary, she gave him a bullshit lie about international calls needing to occur within a certain timeframe, etc. Steve understood he was butting into Billy's goings-on, during an hour he couldn't play civilian.

That was another aspect of their relationship they kept dodging.

Steve did not consider white-collar crime unfamiliar. In fact, it's wildly rampant in society; it just takes the right lawyers and judges to keep things swept under the rug.

Maybe Billy didn't talk about it for the same reason Steve didn't open up about his fears of being disposable. When they managed a safe little time capsule where underlying circumstances didn't exist, things went great. Splendid, even.

But time capsules have to open at some point.

Billy called Steve.

"Hello?" he said to the unfamiliar number. If he sounded a little miffed, it's because he'd taken more spam calls than genuine correspondences this past week, having not known what Billy's international number was—

"Steve."

That sounded...wrong.

“Billy?”

He could hear the man’s breath on the receiver. Heavier than it should have been. “I know you don’t like this. But I need you to come here.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

Stupid question. Billy sounded half the man he was. Steve wanted to know what happened to the other half.

“I’m injured. I’ll be fine—”

“Define ‘injured.’”

“Steve,” Billy huffed like a laugh, but Steve could hear it stick in his throat. He hovered in the middle of his apartment, helpless to do anything but hold the phone to his ear. “I’m not arguing right now. Could you just...get in the car that comes to pick you up?”

“A car? What kind of car?”

“The driver will use the buzzer of your building. They won’t come up. Just get in the car and then the plane—”

“Plane? Billy, where did you go?”

He laughed again, a little of his voice leaking into it. “Steve, please. Can I see you or not?”

Steve croaked into the receiver, revolving listlessly in his apartment while his brain failed to keep up. “I-I—wha—um.”

Except, despite everything, like how very likely he would come back to only one or no jobs, it really wasn’t a choice for Steve. His chest ached for Billy. He missed the bastard’s smug smiles and longed for the animation he let fill his face when he relaxed with Steve.

And he felt the itch of being wanted. His ingrained eagerness to be with the person who needed him.

All of it scrambled in his brain so Steve wound up raising his voice while fisting his hair, “A plane? I have to pack! What do I pack?”

Billy’s voice came out breathily on the phone, like he filled it with relief. “You don’t need to pack anything—”

“I NEED PANTS, BILLY!”

Steve got in the car.

Steve got on the plane.

The stupid private jet in which Steve could have his own disco if he wanted because it seemed like only he and the pilot were on the damn thing. He brought the book Billy had gifted him about *The New Yorker* for something to distract himself, even though he mostly stared blankly at the pages while he waited for the plane to land.

A part of him expected to arrive in the middle of nowhere. Which, to be fair, they had to land in a private hanger outside of the city. But then the next car took him amongst grand buildings and turned into a narrow side street only residents would use. Steve burst upon the sidewalk, only hindered briefly by the receiving of a hotel key and the remark, “Room 532.”

Steve skipped the elevator. He wore heels in his spare time; he would’ve beaten the lift anyway.

As with any hotel, the key took some figuring out, but when he managed, he stepped into the suite. “Billy?”

It smelled like any other nice hotel. Cream carpets and matching walls. A splash of color on the rumpled bedspread amongst Billy’s clutter. Steve followed the floor plan of the sitting room to the bedroom and then the bathroom, where he heard the shower running. He knocked on the door, “Billy?”

And then louder, “Billy?”

“Come in.”

Steve carefully pushed into the room, unsure what he’d find...

What looked like two open first aid kits sat on the counter. Steve couldn't read anything from those alone, but he didn't have to because the shower was a large, glass cubicle. It stood big enough for four people. Billy sat on the floor, his chest wrapped in sodden cotton and gauze; barefoot underneath his black slacks. Steve opened the glass door as Billy lifted his head—

He knelt on the hard tiles, putting his arms around Billy's neck to greet him, to hold him. Cool tendrils seeped through Steve's hair, soft claws over his scalp until the water properly soaked his strands.

"Steve, your clothes."

Instead of answering, he looked at the shower knobs and turned the hot water up. As soon as heat seeped over them, Billy melted against him. His head fell easily where Steve pulled him into the bend of his neck. Billy's hands fumbled a little to find him, but all he could do was grasp onto him to avoid bending or twisting his injured torso.

Steve remained kneeling over him long past being soaked through.

He did not cry until Steve undressed, leaving his sodden raiment on the shower floor to retrieve the scissors from the first aid kits. He carefully snipped through the ruined gauze and medical tape. Soon a pile of white, and diluted pinkish-orange blood also sat on the floor. Whoever had stitched up Billy's sides had done a good job, but Steve had to dry him off and rebind him.

After the first wince, Billy came undone. Steve wished he could say something to make it easier, but all he had were small reassurances and quietly given orders.

"Can you hold this here?"

"Lift your arm up."

"Hang on. Almost done."

An odd talent of Steve's: tolerating pain with silent grace. A skill which Billy ironically lacked. But where Steve withheld, Billy knew how to release. Perhaps here was one of their bridges.

“Put your arm around me. Lift with your legs.”

The towels Steve put over their shoulders helped them grip one another. Once standing, Billy halted, “Wait. Take these off.”

To each of their credit, neither made a joke as Billy’s trousers and underwear landed with a wet slosh next to Steve’s pile. Steve wrapped his towel around his waist once Billy sat on the bed. With his hands freed, he went about drying Billy’s hair with his towel and opening the bed for Billy to fall into.

“Have you taken any meds?”

“Nothing spectacular.”

His head sagged on the pillow, following Steve to the bathroom, where he found an ibuprofen bottle and shook out two tablets. His eyes followed Steve’s hand raking his hair off his face, and the movement of his throat around a swallow. The filling of a glass at one of the sinks.

Billy let him wrangle a pillow underneath his body so he could swallow the pills with ease. Before he did so, Billy informed, “The blue pill bottle is sleeping meds.”

Steve went and read the label, even peeling the thing off to read the lengthy underside. “When did you last eat?”

“I’ll eat tomorrow. I need to rest now.”

But Steve went into the living room and pilfered through the mini fridge. He returned with apple juice and a granola bar. “If you take this on an empty stomach, you might vomit. I’m not letting you suffocate in your sleep.”

“They put that on there to avoid lawsuits,” Billy complained even while he accepted the juice bottle. He munched slowly, almost carefully on the sugar-glazed nuts of the granola bar while...

Steve got dressed. In Billy’s clothes.

He crouched right in between Billy’s suitcase and the open wardrobe

to select one of his long-sleeves and boxer briefs. Billy blinked softly, feeling warmth blossom through his chest and sink through his belly.

Regardless, he sassed, "You're not gonna sleep naked with me?"

Steve climbed next to him, facing him as if he intended to get up again soon. He tore into his own granola bar. "I don't know what to expect with you. I'd rather not be forced out of the building naked."

Billy's hand touched his leg as he bit into the bar. "Nothing's going to happen. There's a menu on the table out there. Order room service."

"Tomorrow," Steve refused with a cheek full of almonds. "We'll eat tomorrow. Or...when the sun's up in two hours."

Billy didn't ask him to, but Steve stroked fingers through his hair after Billy took his sleeping medicine. "Don't leave," he moaned tiredly, the force of the little pill dragging him under.

"I'm not leaving. But you can't octopus me in your sleep."

Billy sighed, intending for more words to come out than the ones that did. "...test me..."

When his breaths came and went like the heavy sway of the ocean, Steve kept petting through his hair. Even though Billy couldn't hear him anymore, Steve sighed, "Scared the shit out of me, idiot. I missed you. Don't do that."

Billy hummed in his sleep as if he heard him. Even drugged unconscious, the man tried to retort.

Steve leaned down to kiss his temple and tucked him in to keep him warm. When a knock on the door sounded, Steve donned one of the bathrobes and held a shoehorn behind the door as he answered. The shoehorn was a ridiculous ornate thing from the wardrobe; more like a walking stick than a device to help a heel slip into a boot.

The woman on the other side of the door dressed as expensively as Billy and appeared just as austere. Steve had never seen her before even though she acted like she knew him. "Is he well?"

“He’s asleep. What do you need?”

“To go over his intended schedule for today.”

“Reschedule it. He isn’t doing anything for at least two days.”

She did not look anxious. Merely...disappointed? “That will be...difficult.”

“He’s a difficult man,” Steve sighed, his posture tilting back into the room and warranting an end to this discussion. “Whoever expects to see him likely knows that.”

“Good morning, Mr. Harrington,” she dismissed.

“What is your name?” he halted.

“Elena Varma. Hargrove knows me as Elicit Vagina.”

Steve’s jaw went slack, and if she were anyone other than Billy’s secretary and personal guard, now would be the time to take his head off. Instead, she elaborated, “I’m a lesbian.”

“Right,” he nodded dazedly. “Are you single? I know somebody.”

Her dark eyes narrowed at him, but her mouth and brows moved with amusement. Like a test, she inquired, “Are they butch?”

“No,” he said a bit perplexedly, thinking of Robin’s amber blond bob and all of her many-colored Converse on which she doodled.

A pause. Then, “Does she have bad taste?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’ll be in touch.”

Steve exhaled, “Great,” under his breath as he shut the door. Crossing over to the living room, he set the shoehorn down and picked up the room service menu.

When Billy’s eyes next opened, it was to the beckoning of dishware clatter and summons of browned butter and tangy, aromatic cheese.

Steve sat much as he last remembered, sitting facing Billy while a tray sat where his pillows ought to be. A cart of more food stood by the foot of the bed. Billy's blurry gaze traveled back to Steve, who chewed on a croissant with a newspaper, of all things, in his hand.

It was perfect.

Minus the abhorrent headache and parchedness of his throat.

"Coffee."

Billy couldn't not smile at the wide eyes that lifted up to him. Steve rushed to swallow the lump in his cheek and handed him his glass of water from the tray. Billy shook his head. "No. Coffee."

"Water first."

Billy sighed and leaned over as much as his injured side allowed him to. He drained the glass. And he never got his coffee. Steve made him drink a strong cup of tea, as if that would replace Billy's usual espresso in the morning.

"Your, um, personal assistant came by. She knows to reschedule all of your—whatever you do. I said you need two days."

"Two days?" Billy chirped in the middle of grumbling over his tea. "That's a vacation."

Steve huffed a sound, but looked toward the window and its sheer, white curtains. "What street are we on?"

"What was that sound?" Billy diverted.

Steve looked at him. "What sound?"

"The sound you just made."

"You mean the sound of you complaining that I work too much but consider two days a vacation. That sound?"

"Yeah, that sound," he remarked. "I stand by what I said. You don't need two jobs."

“Billy, you got stabbed yesterday. Twice. Or whatever the hell happened to you.”

“I’ll have you know I was only stabbed once. The side mirror of a moving car clipped my other side.”

Whatever mirth he intended to be in that statement wilted in the face of Steve’s glare. Billy took the silent admonishment with grace and, after a moment, said, “I’m not the criminal you think I am.”

“I never said you were one.”

“Walking around with a stab wound and clear assault damage isn’t helping my case,” he responded with another unhappy sip of his tea. At least Steve put milk and sugar in it. Dessert for breakfast.

“Long story short: I got a job and the old man CEO noticed me. He liked me a lot. I was the one male secretary in the place; it was easy to notice me. The women liked me—”

“Women have always liked you,” Steve retorted quietly. But he set his things on the tray and laid across the bed to pillow his head on Billy’s thigh.

He gazed up at him while Billy continued, “It was easy. If the head of a building likes you, job promotions come fast. Training happens in the boss’s own office. Then the asshole died and both his heir, and the board, did not take it well to my name being in the will. I’ve been cleaning up a lot of their mess.”

Steve listened and processed, “This heir was driving the car?”

Billy snorted and instantly grimaced for the pain it caused him. Steve began to get up for the painkillers, but Billy’s fingers plunged into his hair; not gripping him, but softly holding his head. “Stay. I’m fine. No, I doubt the idiot even has a license. He can’t aim a blade, either. He’s running out of money, that’s why he’s so desperate.”

“Where is he now?”

Billy’s head tilted almost piteously at him. “Do you really want to know that?”

“Well I can’t decide which is more romantic: inviting me into a shit storm, or making sure I’m safe first.”

He could see some of the tension leave Billy’s face and shoulders as he reached for Steve’s tray and took his other croissant. “He’s in the hospital. But I don’t know if he’ll make it.”

Steve could read between the lines. “Us trust fund kids. We’re not built for street fighting.”

That earned an animated frown from Billy, who spoke regardless of his full mouth. “You gave me a hell of a wallop once.”

“I lost that fight.”

“You didn’t have a homophobic, retired veteran waiting for you to bring your sister home. And this guy clearly doesn’t have a pretty boy waiting for him or he might’ve won.”

Steve laughed but it faded as he just...marveled at Billy. They had never talked this openly before. However proud of Billy he felt, though, the nagging dark corner of his brain turned his thoughts onto himself. He let slip:

“You work so much harder than me.”

Billy immediately wasn’t having it. His head tilted again but instead of pity, it was chastisement. “Steve.”

“No, no—I just mean I’m proud of you.”

“You can be proud of me without sounding like I’m about to toss you out onto the curb. I just told you the very idea of you helped keep me alive.”

“And I abandoned two jobs and an overpriced apartment to be here, so I hope you mean it. You might be keeping both of us alive for a while—Hey.”

In between thrown bits of croissant and grapes, Billy chided, “I’ve been. Trying. To convince you. That I mean it. And it takes a drive-by to. Get. Your. Attention.”

“Okay! Okay—this is disgusting. Stop it!”

Steve reared up only to be ensnared by Billy’s overstretched arms. Steve caught himself on Billy’s collarbones so he did not press on his chest, tugging the skin on his sides. “B! Be careful.”

A hand cradled the side of Steve’s head as a soft smirk lifted Billy’s mouth. “Let me kiss you.”

Steve, defiant till the last, pushed him down so he didn’t exert himself. Then he kissed Billy slowly, reverently. He liked kissing Billy a whole lot. Loved it. He liked Billy’s taste and the sound of their lips parting before meeting for more. He liked the puffs of Billy’s breath across his cheek and his hands reaching for Steve. Finding him. Holding him.

Eventually, though, Billy whispered against his lips, “Why did you ask what street we’re on?”

Steve rolled his lips together, perhaps seeking a balm for being chapped from kissing, or nerves. “It’s fashion week. We might be able to see stuff from the window.”

Billy claimed one more kiss and then released him to clean up the bed and scout the street below. Billy managed to reach the bathroom on his own, where he took another pair of meds and readied for a day in. With Steve.

Steve, who insisted he stay in bed.

Steve, who found a full-length mirror in the wardrobe and held it half out the window so Billy could see the horizon of the street reflected from his place on the bed. He watched Steve more than anything. His giggles at how ridiculous it was to hold a mirror out the window. When his features relaxed as he watched the traffic and people arriving to a place a few blocks down. When he asked Billy if

“Can you see the red coat? That thing’s massive.”

And, “Somebody famous just got there. The paparazzi are going nuts.”

Steve really should have expected the events of the next day, but Billy still faced the stern glare and long blinks when he sighed. “B, you’ve only rested a day. Your stitches could still tear.”

“One runway isn’t going to kill me. We’ll pop in and not attend the after party. Elicit’s already managed to get tickets—”

“Her name’s *Elena*,” Steve frowned with his hands on his hips.

“No, it isn’t,” Billy scoffed, and went to dissect Steve’s luggage himself...

He grasped the linen shoe bag, recognizing the shape inside. He lifted one of the Hot Chick 100s. “You took packing seriously, huh?”

Steve seemed to be really grappling with patience. “I didn’t know what you needed. A nurse or a kinky leg to hold onto.”

“So I got both,” he grinned.

A reluctant, little smile pulled at Steve’s face. “I’m not wearing those out.”

Billy had already set the pair on the living room table when he grimaced, “What? Why not?”

Steve glanced at the windows like they might hold an answer. “*Because* I’ll be giant and make more noise than anyone else in heels.”

Billy wasn’t buying it. He held onto the back of the couch to help himself stand and then made his way to his own clothes. “If there’s any time to wear what you want and get away with it, it’s fashion week. Come here, no one’s going to let you wear jeans beside a runway.”

Billy had way too much fun dressing him. A quiet little warning bell went off in Steve’s head over this, but he couldn’t listen to it without also admitting that he enjoyed himself. One of Billy’s silk button-ups around his body felt nice.

Intimate.

A black suit jacket over it made Steve feel chic and professional. And when Billy asked him to lift his foot onto the bed, Billy double wrapped the chain of his pendant around Steve's ankle. Amber and opals on one side, and a golden saint on the other.

"If you're tired or hurt at *any point*, tell me," Steve lectured in the car.

"Yes, dear."

"I mean it," he insisted, but Billy's hand on his thigh tightened.

"I know, baby. I'm okay. The show's not even two hours long. Try to relax. You look real hot."

Steve snorted and rubbed the silk of his shirt between his fingers. "Is this shirt new?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I've never seen you wear it. And it would've matched my green shoes," he added with slanted eyes at him.

"So what if I wanted to match my partner? Try and sue me."

Partner. Steve caught his face in his hand, eyes aching with the moisture overflowing from his heart.

The car pulled up alongside a bustling street. Elena Varma accompanied them through the open double doors, but she kept to herself. She sheltered Billy's other side while Steve slid an arm over Billy's shoulders and held onto him. If a pair of eyes scrutinized them, Billy was hardly the only rich man with a pretty thing in heels on his arm. And people only had compliments for Steve's classic choice in shoe.

The off-duty models sitting around them in the chairs along the runway were very sweet. Steve and Billy kindly refused their inquiries over attending the later afternoon events, but gratefully accepted their information about the show.

Models talk. And in this world where everyone knows someone who knows everyone, the models explained the architecture of the

runway, the designer's vision, the gossip about the model opening the show, and the model closing the show, etc.

"I like the butterflies," Steve said, pointing to the ceiling, where a myriad of paper butterflies on wires fluttered with the air conditioning ventilation.

"I like you."

Steve pointed flustered but narrowed eyes on him. "Are you even paying attention?"

"To the important things," Billy replied, leaning back with an arm over the back of Steve's chair. He did contribute, "I like the columns. The effect of the eroded marble and gold filigree is interesting. I enjoy looking at it."

Steve leaned into him, resting a hand on Billy's thigh as the lighting changed and the show began. The fashion proved largely sculptural instead of practical, but Steve pointed as models went by.

"My mom would know what that means."

"If the designer was inspired by Greece, then it's something mythological. Greece seems to be very in right now."

"You read my magazines," Steve accused with a smile.

"I smell the colognes."

That earned Billy a soft nudge before Steve's jaw relaxed in sight of a male model striding past them. "You'd look really good in that."

"The gold speedo?"

"No," he lightly slapped Billy's knee. "The shirt."

"I don't really go for pastels."

Steve turned soft eyes on him. He touched the underside of Billy's chin with a fond knuckle. "You and your jewel tones."

Then a model turned onto the stage wearing a sweatshirt totally encrusted with jewels. Steve and Billy exchanged looks, which ended with Steve covering his laughter and Billy pressing his face into Steve's shoulder.

Steve and Billy left the show with at least one pocket full of models' agents' business cards. Steve had taken the time to write the models' names on each card along with a descriptor, as if they actually intended to remember and reach out to them later that night, should their plans change.

Their plan did not change.

If anything, Steve and Billy only more firmly wanted to retire to their hotel room after they ordered coffees—and Steve nearly broke his ankle stepping off the pavement.

"The puddle lied! The water lied to me," he lamented through laughter, having thought that the water was far shallower than it actually proved to be. He powered through their venture in the coffee shop, but as soon as they were in the car, Billy pulled his leg up to inspect his ankle and Steve held up one of the shoes.

"Holy shit. Look at that." The flat of the heel now had a harsh angle to it, as if he'd worn these shoes for a decade instead of thrown off his stride by a waterlogged pothole. Both shoes had water and grit on the insides too.

"I'm sorry, B. These might need some work—Oo!"

Billy had touched his ice coffee to Steve's ankle. "Don't worry about it. Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah," he said on a lighter note. "The ladies we sat with were really nice."

"What about the show?"

That gave Steve pause. "Um. Honestly? They all walked too fast for me to really see much."

Billy laughed so hard his stitches made him stop.

Notes for the Chapter:

Casino Royale shower scene??? Anybody??

And it's my own guilty pleasure for Steve to call Billy, B.

What city are they in? I have no idea. I wanted Steve to fly to Europe but then it wouldn't make sense for him to walk into Billy in the shower, freshly bandaged *shrugs*

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

VAH VAH VOOM! We're at the finale orz though I was tempted to split it in half lol

Thank you so much for following this story! Because it's so long, I won't be posting this chapter on tumblr lol

The rest of the week progressed smoothly. Billy sent Steve's shoes for repairs, and in the meantime basked in waking up next to Steve naked, cooking together because Steve insisted on using the suite's small kitchen, and going for walks through the city.

One morning, he woke up to Steve face-planted beside him, the covers shoved down to his waist because he slept hot. Billy gazed at the line of Steve's spine for a long time; the base of his waist and the rising hills of his ass. Then he rolled over onto his bruised and scraped side to be closer to him, to bury his nose in Steve's hair, and use the same pillow for the rest of the lazy morning.

Only to be agonizingly sore for the rest of the day and into the next. Steve went out and got him a muscle relieving lotion, at the expense of giving Billy an earful.

"You have two broken ribs, you—!"

"Be nice to me, I love you."

That left Steve sputtering like an adorable deer in the headlights for an hour.

Then sluggishly pacing the suite for another hour, taking a shower, and dodging Billy as much as he could in the confined space. Billy let him pace. And when he finished a call on the couch, sitting opposite an array of folders on the coffee table, Steve appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"Did you mean it?"

Billy looked up at him and opened his arm. A silent summons.

"I'm not lying on you."

"Yes, you are."

Steve mutely scoffed but moved himself to the couch. Billy lifted a leg as he rotated to lie back, and Steve slumped in between his thighs. Billy puffed through a mouthful of hair, but petted it out of the way as they reclined on the furniture that barely accommodated both of them.

His arms settled around Steve, one of his hands drawing swirls around the vertebrae at the base of his neck and start of his back. That hand trailed through his shoulder blades and back up. "Of course I mean it."

"It hasn't been that long."

"Doesn't matter to me. I mean it."

He felt something almost deflate inside of Steve; a unique surrender as he let Billy finally take his weight. And then, of all things,

Steve fell asleep.

Passed right out.

Billy listened to the sleep-volume of his breaths and watched the rise and fall of his back. Convention dictated that some kind of response be given, but Billy let himself be caught between confusion and comfort. He massaged Steve's nape at the base of his skull, chuckling to himself when he earned snuffled snores for it.

"I wasn't done working," he said to the ceiling.

Steve woke as Billy shifted him onto his side so Billy could get up and answer the door. Thai delivery. Steve moved a hand over his eyes, shielding against the light in the room. "We have leftovers."

"Now we'll have more."

The suite filled with the aromas of Thai curry, among other dishes that neither could finish in an evening. Despite his complaints, Steve opened the foil container of rice and bent over it to inhale the starch aroma and the slices of limes provided.

Billy didn't prod Steve to say it back. He didn't really need to, with the way Steve bandaged him after a shower. Surprised Billy with a cappuccino when he returned from a walk. Made poached eggs the way Billy liked even though Steve preferred fried. All of the displays that proved Billy is always on Steve's mind.

As annoying as it was to sleep on his back, this meant that he woke up for the rest of their trip to Steve lying halfway on his chest, face tucked against the side of his neck. Billy liked being so pampered, even if there were cuddly attempts to protect him from himself.

Steve was not prepared for Billy to amp it up tenfold on the plane. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the fish out of water did not like flying.

"Is this why you wanted me to come? You're a baby three thousand feet up."

"We're not meant to be up here, *Steve*."

He rolled his eyes as he reached for Billy's toiletry bag. "I understand the sleeping meds now. Do you want one?"

"Is water wet?"

"Don't be a dick. I love you."

Billy nearly choked because he stared so long at him, the pill stuck to his tongue and went down at the wrong time.

The plane landed in the early evening, and Steve held his hand while Billy worked through his medicated brain fog. In the car, Billy told the driver Steve's address, to which the latter slid a hand over his thigh. "Are you sure you don't want to be home after the trip?"

Not wanting to spook him, Billy only replied, "I'm not ready to stop bothering you yet."

Steve planted a hard kiss on his cheek and bit his ear.

In his apartment building, Billy called the lift while Steve opened his mailbox. “Huh. Not as much as I expected there to be...”

A balloon swelled in Billy’s gut when Steve let him take the small stack of envelopes in favor of opening the larger parcel. Billy quietly slotted the invoices into his breast pocket and gazed over Steve’s shoulder in the elevator. “From your mom?”

“Yeah, but...” Steve held the large envelope under his arm so he could better handle the magazine. “I’ve never seen this one before. She doesn’t usually use these sticky, bookmark things—oh my god. Billy.”

The elevator opened, so he did not see until he guided Steve out of it by a hand on his lower back. “Billy, we’re in this.”

“Hang on,” he said while unlocking Steve’s apartment. Once inside, he set his tote bag of leftover containers on the thrifted coffee table and then took the magazine from him. It wasn’t a monthly publishing, but a special edition for the various fashion weeks around the world. And sure enough, in the middle of the avant garde design of images breaking up columns of text, sat an image taken from across the runway. The photographer centered the model in the image, but Steve and Billy sat behind her.

Billy smirked. “Maybe I can find a way to get the original cell. That’s a good picture for my wall.”

“Is it okay that you’re in a magazine?” Steve wondered.

Billy set it openly down on the table and went about removing his and Steve’s coats. “I’m not Interpol’s most wanted. We’re not named underneath the picture, and I think the only person to really lock onto it is your mother.”

Steve hummed an acknowledgement as he plopped down onto the couch. Billy went about heating up the leftovers while he called his mother.

“Hi, mom. I just got your package—yeah, I just got back.”

Billy could hear the slight whiny of a voice distorted over the phone, but he could clearly hear the words, *“Who is it you’re sitting with? He’s handsome.”*

Steve’s voice melted into a mixture of bashful and only slightly defensive. “Billy. Billy’s my boyfriend, mom.”

The man himself came to sit next to him. This felt like more of a coming out than a nosy mother—

“Well when were you going to tell me that you two were gallivanting around fashion week? I would’ve booked a flight!”

Billy’s brows lifted and Steve’s eyes rolled in response. “I didn’t know I was going to be there. And you’re like the honorary CEO of dad’s company. You can’t just drop everything and go somewhere.”

“What is the point of being in charge if I can’t do exactly as I like?”

The corners of Billy’s mouth pointed down in an inverted, impressed smile. “I like her,” he declared, and returned to the microwave.

Steve grumbled behind him, “Of course you do—What? Yeah, you’ve seen him before, that’s why he’s familiar. Yeah. Don’t look in the yearbook, his picture’s awful.”

“Excuse you,” Billy exclaimed to Steve’s cheeky smile.

He spoke on the phone for a little bit into their meal, until he broke it off with the promise to call his mother the next day. Then he put Billy to work beating eggs for a red velvet cake.

“What the hell. I have stitches.”

“I have needs, Billy.”

He snorted and added the mental note to get his boyfriend a standing mixer.

It took two days for Steve to call him at the office about the invoices Billy had tucked away in his coat. “Sir, Steve Harrington on the line.”

“Put him through.” The click of connection. “Hello?”

“Where’s my mail?”

Billy set his pen down. “If you’re referring to your bills, I paid them.”

Foreboding silence crackled softly on the line. Until Steve said flatly, “I’m not happy about that.”

Billy reclined into the buttery leather of his desk chair. “Will you *please* let me cover things this month without a fuss? I don’t want you losing sleep over bill payments.”

“Well, by some miracle, I still have both jobs, so you didn’t need to do that.”

Billy’s teeth grit as his jaw slid to the side. Steve losing a job or two wouldn’t be the worst thing. “Then that’s money you get to save for better things.”

“Don’t pay my bills anymore.”

Billy picked up his pen, if nothing else than to have something to squeeze. “May we talk about how your lease is almost up?”

“How do you know that?”

“Lucky guess. A lot of leases expire around this time of year.”

“What is your point?” Steve bit out.

Billy did not understand what part of Steve’s brain was making this into rocket science. “Is it so difficult to imagine moving in with me?”

“It hasn’t been a year!”

“I promise I’m just as high maintenance in a house as I am in a hotel room.”

He heard Steve sigh into the receiver. “You don’t have a house.”

Fair point, Billy lived in a condominium in the city, but he knew topic avoidance when he heard it. It was Billy’s turn to sigh. “You

have time to think about it.”

“Don’t use your negotiation bullshit on me.”

The sigh turned into a huff of amusement. Even in his annoyance, and a tiny bit of heartache, Billy enjoyed these little moments where Steve showed a bit of his upbringing. Steve may not always be the brightest bulb in the room, but he always shined.

“While I have you here—”

“Oh my god.”

“No, listen,” Billy hushed. “I’m due for a real vacation. So are you.”

“If I ask for more time off, I’ll be fired for sure.”

“We can make the same laps around the same conversations all you want to. One of those jobs is taking years off your life. Whichever one gives you the better severance package, take it, and we’ll spend a week or two in Greece.”

“First of all: no. Second of all: why Greece?”

“I can get one of those gold speedos and try it out in its intended setting.”

He earned an unwilling snort at that.

Billy couldn’t guess how many months it would take to convince Steve to take a vacation. He dreaded the possibility of a whole other year of an overpriced lease before Steve moved in with him.

Thankfully, the matter was swept right out of his hands, by a different phone call from Steve.

“What are you doing tonight?”

Billy smiled over his folders that he was filing back into his desk, readying to get the hell out of this office. “You asking me on a date, pretty boy?”

“I’m inviting you to meet my mom.”

For some reason, it never occurred to Billy that he would ever meet Steve’s family. That epiphany brought him up short, long enough that Steve added, “You don’t have to. I know this is last minute—”

“Where do I meet you?”

“You can go home first. Shower or—it doesn’t have to be tonight.”

“With your schedule, it’s tonight,” Billy grumbled, since his distaste for Steve’s work ethic had yet to be appeased.

Billy’s office had its own en suite bathroom and closet, so he took a quick shower, changed into more business-casual attire, and met the Harringtons

At a food truck.

That surprised him. As Billy’s car pulled up, he went ahead and unbuttoned some of his shirt. His gaze locked on the tattered hems of Steve’s high-waist jeans. He looked good in those, and the legs were high enough that he could see his pendant twinkling on Steve’s skin.

Mrs. Harrington shared her son’s hair apart from a shock of silver growing right out of her blunt widow’s peak. Even the length was similar. She kept petting her nape like it had been recently cut.

Steve’s found him and waved him over. “Mom, this is Billy Hargrove.”

She offered her hand, which Billy accepted while stepping in to hover his cheek close to hers on one side, then the other. “It’s a pleasure, ma’am.”

“Thanks for meeting us on such short notice. I hope you like Mexican.”

He grinned. “Born and raised in California. Absolutely.”

They took their boxes of food into the park, where Billy learned Steve had strung up large fairy lights in the rafters of a pavilion. He jogged

over to an extension cord, plugged it into a communal generator, and they had the best spot in town.

Billy noticed Mrs. Harrington's simple, white sneakers underneath her hemmed trousers. Chic and utilitarian. She's an older woman, of course she'd need to take care of her feet. Steve wore his old smoking slippers because he was convinced *they make jeans dapper, Billy*.

"What are you boys doing this summer? The city will be unbearable once July hits."

Billy swooped in, even as Steve's expression slowly sank into stoic unease. "I've been trying to convince Steve to go on vacation with me. It's not going well."

The man himself refuted, "We were just gone a week."

"Not on holiday?" his mother inquired.

Steve dodged, "Billy was in a car accident, so I went to take care of him while he worked."

"What places were you thinking of?" she asked. Her son diverted his frustration into his soft taco.

"Greece," Billy replied. "My personal assistant has been looking at villas for me—"

"Which islands?"

Billy's features opened; he recognized a knowledgeable tone when he heard it. "Where do you recommend?"

That's all she needed. Mrs. Harrington began counting off with her fingers, "Obviously Santorini and Mykonos are gorgeous, but they're unbearable right now. Thassos is lovely but secluded. Crete is so large, you have a whole range to choose from. Depending on where you are, you have easy access to other islands."

Billy slanted his gaze to Steve, turning the choice over to those large, hazel eyes. Steve reacted like Billy had just poked him with something cold.

“I’m not going!”

“Why not?” his mother exclaimed.

“I can’t ask for any more time off—”

“Say you’ve had a death in the family. They’re obligated to give you a week.”

Steve sat with his mouth hanging open. Billy decided Mrs. Harrington was coming with them, and she put up far less of a fuss than Steve. With his mother locked in, Steve couldn’t say no any longer. And she proved a marvelous travel companion.

She played poker with them on the plane when Billy was awake. Made him a stiff whiskey sour halfway through the journey. And she didn’t blink twice at Steve’s shoe collection Billy managed to convince him to bring. She even brought a high grit nail file and showed him how to sand down the plastic jutting out from the heels.

“See that, baby? Good as new. You can only do this so many times before you ought to have a cobbler put on a new top piece.”

“Did you bring one of those, um, polishing cloths?”

“The microfibers? Yes, in the outer pocket of my weekender on the seat, there.”

He got up to pilfer through her bag while she cleaned up the table in between the facing seats—“The pocket facing me, Stevie.”

“Oh,” he chirped, and returned with a cloth to polish his opals.

When she settled for her own rest on the other side of the plane, Billy moved to sit beside him. Steve had his socked foot on the seat, wiping Billy’s pendant with the cloth until it shined. “I like that she calls you Stevie. I might steal that.”

Steve gave him a congenial glare. “Okay, B.”

He unclasped the chain, gave it a once over with the cloth, and put his arms around Billy’s neck to refasten it. Billy’s fingertips touched

the familiar surface. “You can keep wearing it.”

“I don’t wanna lose it.” Steve kissed his cheek. “And we still have four hours of this flight.”

He held the pendant tighter and wrapped his other arm around Steve’s flamingo leg. “Good Christ.”

* * *

Steve knew Billy loved the sea. He *knew* that. Still, he wasn’t prepared for how Billy *shined*.

He’d definitely been fired from one of his jobs when he said he needed another week off. His second boss was hardly pleased but hadn’t fired him outright on the spot.

Yet.

He hadn’t told Billy or his mom yet. His landlord had thankfully given him an extension to decide on the lease, but Steve suspected he was using that time to scout a more worthy tenant.

Steve wanted to enjoy his time in Greece. And for most of the first two days, he did. Billy insisted on going to the beach even though their villa hosted a saltwater pool. Their private little stretch of sand that they had to go down what felt like a mountain of stairs to reach, as well as the beaches closer to the city.

Billy loved it all. And Steve loved watching him love it, even though they both slathered on sunscreen and aloe whereas Mrs. Harrington sensibly donned sunhats and shawls around her waist for skin protection.

During the morning of their third day, Steve emerged onto the expansive deck where she lounged. “Mom!”

She only moved to crook a finger at him, utterly at peace. Billy watched from the door as Steve answered her summons. He put his hands on his knees to be lean in close and ask, “We’re going into the city. Do you want anything?”

That finger hooked his chin and she turned her head to kiss his cheek. “Surprise me.”

Billy and Steve left their house nestled into the hillside to descend into the city. The locals were more than happy to show them their wares, talk prices, and more than once Steve yanked Billy onto a different street. “Control yourself.”

“What? The plates were nice.”

“We need actual *groceries*,” he laughed. “Charm the grandmas over there. Choose what flowers you want. Get the oranges while you’re at it.”

Being told to buy something was an order Billy could meet. It didn’t take long to stock up on citrus and notice that his boyfriend had disappeared, though. Tourists stood out, and one of the vendors noticed Billy’s confusion and pointed in a direction without a word.

He found Steve in one of the narrower streets on the edge of the market. A textiles store; more like a closet in the larger building behind it, but every square inch of the place had been stuff with bolts, rolls, and folds of fabric.

Billy invaded Steve’s space to murmur, “What was that about control?”

“Mom said to surprise her with something. Sometimes she sews.”

Steve held a white linen with tiny floral ribs, and a vibrant aubergine with a vibrant, gradient rainbow meander pattern moving across it.

Billy wondered aloud, “How many meters does it take to make, say a shirt?”

The vendor, in a thick accent replied, “If you know what you’re doing? No more than two.”

“Three meters of both, please.”

“Billy,” Steve whispered. Warning.

"Is she good at sewing?" Billy diverted while the vendor started measuring.

"Yeah, but—"

"Do you think she can make me a shirt with this?" he nodded at the pale, floral fabric. "I look good in linen."

"And what about the other one?" Steve cornered.

"It's gaudy like the rest of your shirts."

"Excuse you!"

Turns out, the villa had a sewing machine tucked away in one of the closets. After Mrs. Harrington cooed over her prizes, she hemmed some of the meander fabric and wrapped up her hair in it. With her large sunglasses, she looked ready for a magazine cover.

Late into the night, though, Billy poured her a glass of wine with the apology, "I didn't mean for you to work on this while you're here. I just thought it would be a side project."

She gratefully accepted the chilled white and said over the pieces of his shirt, "Sometimes it is a relief just to have a different kind of work. Sit with me and tell me about my son."

Billy's brows lifted, but he sat at the hefty slab of wood that was their dining table. With her glass in hand, Mrs. Harrington pointed upward, insinuating the room above them. "Steve's always been a night owl. He's slept ten hours every night we've been here. What on earth does he do that has made him this exhausted?"

Billy rubbed the back of his neck, unsure how traitorous it would be to give her the full extend of Steve's schedule. But she was a woman unaccustomed to being denied.

She listened in contemplative silence until he finished, at which time she took the bottle and refilled her glass. "Thank you for telling me."

That's all Billy got. Until the next morning, when Mrs. Harrington asked him to get her a yard of white silk. "And if I can't find it, is

there another fabric you'd—"

"Just get out, dear. Grab yourself some lunch."

He didn't have to be told twice. On his way out the door, he heard the floorboards creaking of Steve waking up. *Godspeed*, he chuckled to himself.

"Sweetheart, I'd like to talk to you."

Steve turned the full brunt of his bedhead and puffy eyes and lips at her while he waited for the espresso machine to do its thing. "Huh?"

She sputtered through a laugh and set his glass on a tray with sugar, milk, fruit, and toast. "Come out here with me."

In the shade of the deck, she mixed his café au lait for him. "I want to talk to you about Billy and your work."

Steve sighed over his cup. "I'm not caffeinated or drunk enough for this."

"This will go easily if you agree to everything I say."

"God, you and Billy get along way too well."

"Just humor me for a moment. What is the design called on my head wrap?"

Steve stared blankly up at her hair like a student in a 7am class. "A meandering pattern."

"Not a key?"

"The Greek key is as specific thing. A key is meandering but not all meanders are keys."

"What size heel have I been wearing at the pool?"

"Eighty-five millimeters. Where is this going?"

"One more thing: what is the difference between silk and satin?"

“Taste,” he groaned into his beverage.

“I’d like to hire you as my personal stylist.”

She caught him with his cheeks full. She let him have time to recover while she buttered their toast and sprinkled feta over it. He rasped through a burnt throat, “No, you wouldn’t.”

“I’m perfectly serious.”

“You’ve *never* had a stylist.”

She chewed through her toast enough to counter, “In recent years, I have, actually. Getting older, my interests have broadened, and every industry only moves faster. I can’t keep up with all of it. A young mind and body are ideal work companions for me, and frankly, the girl I currently have is just tasteless. Why on earth would I keep her when I’ve practically raised you for the job?”

Steve’s groggy mind needed the time it took to get through two slices of toast before he responded, “What did Billy tell you?”

“You mean after I noticed how bone tired you’ve been? Everything. I asked him to—And since you brought up Billy.”

Steve rubbed circles over his eyes, groaning quietly, “Where is he?”

“I sent him into town. We have all morning,” she announced with the smug victory. It simmered into something somber as she continued, “He let slip that he wants you to move in together. I got the impression you haven’t said yes... Why?”

A heavy sigh left him as he pillowed his head against his palm. “He buys me things all the time.”

“He didn’t grow up with money.”

Steve looked up at her, surprised and admittedly impressed. She shrugged. “You’d be stunned at how stingy rich people can be. Take your father’s Indiana mortgage, for example. The ones who’ve known poverty are more willing to explore their gained wealth. What makes you uncomfortable with him spending it on you? Does he want an

open relationship?”

“No,” he said, though it came out more like a whine. “We’re monogamous.”

“Does he have an unruly fetish in bed?”

Steve didn’t dare look up at her while he raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m not talking about my sex life with my mother. And no.”

“So the man who endured a car accident, whom you left work for so you could tend to him, from whom you *do* accept certain gifts—”

“I have moments of weakness,” Steve defended weakly.

“You need to be honest with me, baby. Because I’m not seeing any reason you should be saying no. Plenty of people bestow gifts as a form of affection. It’s ingrained in nature. Your handsome bird of paradise is courting you with shiny, pretty things.”

“Dad’s only ever gotten you things as thanks and apologies.”

Her gaze held his while she sipped her coffee. “And I got you those Nikes you loved during your teens. Even a pair to match your first job uniform—”

“We don’t talk about that,” he curtailed, getting a smile from her.

“I know that bouquet on the table is for Billy, not me. You’ve always gotten flowers for your beaux. You’re not caught on the gifts, baby. It’s something else. Is it the money behind them?”

Steve swished water around his mouth, and then fiddled with a grape while he thought about it. “I guess I’m. Worried...about...”

“Being trapped?” his mother finished.

Even with it out in the air, Steve didn’t want to admit it. “Billy’s not a bad person.”

“Isn’t he the one you fought with in high school?”

Steve choked on his spit. “I fought a lot of people back then. And I deserved it. It’s been ten years. Billy and I only argue over him buying everything my hands touch.”

His mother only lifted a brow but nodded her understanding. Steve added, “I...don’t know how to tell him I’m afraid of being a kept thing. I’m not housewife material.”

“Has Billy said that he wants you doing his laundry and cooking his meals?”

That gave Steve pause. “No. If anything, he always wants to order out. But he keeps saying I don’t need two jobs—well, down to one now.”

“The one being with me,” she smiled, but Steve couldn’t return it. She rerouted, “In a perfect scenario, what are the circumstances that have you with Billy. Or *not* with Billy.”

She had her answer just by the way Steve’s features wilted into acute sorrow. But Steve needed to come to his own realizations.

“I don’t want to be dependent on him. That scares me.”

“Financially or emotionally?”

Steve grimaced a little in the sunlight reflecting off the deck into his eyes. “Both? The money stuff makes sense on its own, but emotionally...I don’t have a lot of bad break-ups under my belt, but I know I don’t have the strength for a lot of those. I know this one won’t be easy. If it happens.”

His mother used a tourné knife to split figs and peel an orange. They listened to the trickle of the pool, and further away, the soft noise of the sea. She set the fruit on his side of the tray, and he let himself be taken care of.

“You’re not wrong to be afraid, and wanting to protect yourself. But you are wrong for not taking what you want. If you want him, baby, then take him. He certainly wants you.”

When the doubt persisted in her son’s eyes, she emphasized, “Steve.

The lesson your father wanted to teach you with that ridiculous ice cream job as been learned. Now it's my turn. Take your man. Take the job. Start a new chapter."

She popped a grape into her mouth. "I guarantee I'll be the worst boss you've ever had. And with my name on your resume, you'll do whatever you want hereafter."

* * *

"Hey."

"Hey," Steve smiled softly as Billy came in to kiss his lips. Steve half-hugged him since a fresh bouquet hung off Billy's arm.

"Where's Mrs. H.?"

"She went down to the beach. She finished your shirt."

Billy sighed a, "Great," and went to the table to see it.

Steve heard his fatigue from using the stairs and asked, "Did you eat in town? Mom and I made bruschetta."

"I'd love some. Let me try this on first." Billy wore a very tourist appropriate muscle tank top, but stripped to get the full effect of the linen shirt. He examined the mussel shell buttons gleaming blue in the light. "Ooh...your mom does good work."

Steve sat with the platter of bruschetta and scissors to ready the flowers for a vase. "She offered me a job."

Billy absorbed that and sank onto the bench on the other side. "Is that...good?"

"I'm still deciding."

Billy ate, showered, and when Mrs. Harrington returned, they all collectively agreed on a separate night in. Steve and Billy laid in bed together, hearing the ever so faint noise of her television on the other side of the villa. Billy's arm overlapped Steve's abdomen, gently encouraging them to face each other.

Billy's stomach had sunk after lunch, and hadn't yet buoyed back up. Instead of dealing with Steve's lease, he realized...

"For the job, does this mean you'll be moving back to..."

"I don't know," Steve admitted. But then his lashes swooped up as his adam's apple bobbed over a swallow. "Because you two are dog piling on me, I know she wouldn't mind me getting a roommate in the city."

Billy blinked several times, the wording of that sentence moving slowly through the uncoiled cogs of his brain.

Steve continued, "I'd probably have to visit Hawkins, though. It's about time she moved her closet to a proper storage space, if not loan it to a museum for a temporary exhibit—Mhm!"

Billy kissed him.

And kissed him.

And kissed him some more.

Tasted the mint of his toothpaste, touched his damp hair from the shower they shared. Let Steve touch his lips to his skin and feel the sunlight radiating there, warm to the touch as if he'd just come inside.

Steve's hand moved over the bronze-gold hair on his thigh when he threw it over Steve's pelvis. He sat up to straddling only to lean back down for his lover's mouth, wanting to keep that drunk look in his eyes as he felt Steve harden beneath him.

Enough time passed in between the occasions they made love that neither could last very long. Billy rode him until Steve came, hard, inside, and then pushed Billy to topple backward and sucked him wet. Sucked him dry. Kissed the scars on his sides and fell asleep with Billy's nose in his hair.

The room was so hot from the day that they slept comfortably just as they were, heads on the foot of the bed and as naked as Greece's old gods intended.

* * *

A couple months later, when Steve walked into Billy's condo with his partner's hands over his eyes, he asked, "Is it a water bed?"

"No."

"Tie-dyed bedspread?"

"No."

"We need to talk about your tastes—"

Billy removed his hands and Steve faced a built-in shelving unit in the living room. Steve's shoes had already been moved to display there...along with a new shoebox.

"Why aren't these in the closet?"

"Because I want to scare off guests so I'll have you all to myself."

"You little shit," Steve laughed, and swiped off the box lid.

Sitting on top of the paper, was Steve's new key to Billy's condo. Underneath, were a pair of peach-nude Iriza heels. 100mm. They were cut like pumps on the outer edge of the foot, but left sexily open along the arch.

Billy's arms wrapped around him from behind, chin on Steve's shoulder as he slowly reached inside for them. "To replace the Hot Chicks."

It took a second for Steve to register that, but he retorted as his cheek pressed against Billy's, "You got those fixed."

"For congratulations on your new job."

"Billy."

"For me. Wear them to dinner tonight."

"Oh yeah? Where's dinner?"

“On the counter. It got here just before you. Best place in town.”

“Oh my god.” Steve laughed with a mixture of mirth, annoyance, and just...warmth. Contentment—

“There’s cake too.”

“Oh!”

Notes for the Chapter:

Mrs. H. really said let the gays eat cake and meant it.

Thank you so much for reading!! Just wait for me to have a bad day and I'll make an epilogue chapter lol because this is such a comfort fic for me. But for now, auvoir~

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

Author's Note:

[This fic has a moodboard!](#) The gorgeous @catharrington on tumblr made it for me <3